

## **Reading Comprehension Effective Factors: Translated Persian Folk Tales and English Short Stories Garden Path**

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**ABSTRACT**— A plethora of studies have been done on the factors affecting the learners' reading comprehension ability and the effect of literature and short stories on this skill; however, almost no research has been conducted on the influence of translated Persian folk tales on EFL learners' reading comprehension. This study investigated the effect of reading both short stories and translated Persian folk tales on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension, taking the learners' cultural background into consideration. To this end, 36 intermediate proficiency level participants from a pool of 60 EFL learners were divided into three groups; each took a reading comprehension test. To identify the effect of the two kinds of instruction, the first group was asked to read five English short stories and the second one was required to read five translated Persian folk tales while the third group received no treatment acting as the control group. In a two week interval, all three groups were given another reading comprehension test. The results of two one-way ANOVAs indicated that the effect of short stories was significant and the group who read short stories performed much better than the other two groups regarding the learners' scores on the post-test. Although cultural background and Persian folk tales seemed to enhance reading comprehension, there was no significant difference between this group and control group. The findings of the present study showed that short stories could be useful resources to be implemented in reading classes to help the learners' reading skill improvement.

**KEYWORDS:** short story, Persian folk tale, Reading comprehension, Iranian EFL learners.

### **Introduction**

Reading is deemed to be the mutual interaction of readers' text-based and knowledge-based process which has made this skill to be difficult. Comprehension takes place when the transaction is done between the reader and the text (Kucer, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978). Within the process of comprehension, the reader is expected to attain information from a given text and blend it with information in his repertoire (Celle- Murcia, 1996). Still, the hardship of the skill is claimed to be a flow in classes where the language learners are assigned to do a reading section during which they have to tackle the lackluster journey of vocabulary checking in the dictionary (Nabeel, 1994). Meanwhile, it is through this skill that one can teach writing, speaking, vocabulary, grammar and other linguistic aspects of a given language. The doleful part of the story is when learners are not able to comprehend the text after all the torture they have experienced. A very cursory look at traditional teaching methods reveals that resorting to literature of either the first or second language had been considered as a healing to this problem; except for Audiolingual method onwards (Susan Louise Stern, 1985; Yorio, 1971; Mckinely, 1974; Walsleben, 1975; Gorman, 1979; and Povey, 1979). Over the past two decades, the role of literary text seems to have gained its weight again. Scher (1976) asserts that literary text can be used with students at the beginning and intermediate levels claiming that "language practice, reading comprehension, and possible aesthetic appreciation" (Muyskens, 1983, p. 413). Within the interminable world of literature, short stories seem to be of great help since there appears to be a ubiquitous modus operandi followed in them making the teacher able to handle human problems. A short story is a brief work of prose fiction. The plot form of the short story can be tragic, comic, romantic, or satiric. A folk tale is a short narrative in prose of known or unknown authorship which can be transmitted orally. (Abrams, 1985) There are many reasons for using short stories in a classroom. Short stories are authentic. It makes students ready for the type of the language that students find outside the classrooms. Literature and as a result short stories are motivating. Literature has a high position in many cultures and countries. Therefore, students can experience a real sense of accomplishment at understanding a piece of literature. Also, literature is often more interesting than the texts found in course books. (Kharaghani, 2013: 867) Arigol (2001 as cited in Hismanoglu, 2012 in Khatib&Nasrollahi) enumerated a number of advantages short stories have over other literary texts:

1. The terse nature of short stories has made them easy and simple to understand making learners familiar with other people state of being and culture.

2. They stimulate critical thinking in learners giving birth to their creativity.
3. They lift learners' cultural awareness.
4. They lessen anxiety.
5. They present readers with an interesting world.

A number of studies are done deploying literature as a means for lifting students' reading comprehension ability. For instance, Parkinson and Thomas (2000) provided a list of ten reasons why to use literature in language classrooms:

1. Cultural enrichment
2. Linguistic model
3. Mental training
4. Extension of linguistic competence
5. Authenticity
6. Memorability
7. Rhythmic resource
8. Motivating material
9. Open to interpretation
10. Convenience

Maley (1989) also listed a number of reasons as to why to include literature in language classrooms. In another study conducted by Lao and Krashen (2000) they observed vocabulary and reading improvements after a group was given a literary text. Erkaya (2005) also hold the idea that short stories increase the learners' motivation to read and solve problems. Kharaghani (2013) has asserted that based on the results of the t-test, the group which was exposed to short stories outperformed the other group of Iranian learners. Widdosson (1982) asserted that although literature once played a significant role in language study, its prominence faded as linguistics became the focal point of language programs. Short story and literature as a whole expands language awareness. Asking learners to examine sophisticated or nonstandard examples of language (which can occur in literary texts) makes them more aware of the norms of language use (Widdowson, 1975 as cited by Lazar, 1993). Pourkalhor and Kohan (2013) found that all respondents in a group that the researchers thought reading comprehension through short story showed improvement after the reading course and the results showed that the control group and experimental group had a significant difference in their posttest. To the best of our knowledge, almost no study is so far done on the influence of translated Persian folk tales on reading comprehension. Therefore, the present study seeks to investigate the effect of studying English short stories and translated Persian folktales on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension regarding the merits of them, as English short stories are original texts and translated Persian folktales are more familiar to Iranian learners and closer to their culture. To find out whether the learners' cultural background can help them more than the original texts written by native authors or not, this study answers the following research question:

Is there any significant difference between the effects of English short stories and translated Persian folk tales on reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners?

### **Methodology**

A group of 36 adult, Persian speaking intermediate-level EFL learners participated in this study. These students, males and females, were all studying English as a foreign language, and their ages ranged between 16 to 25 years. None of them had ever been in an English speaking country. These participants were selected out of 60 students who took Quick Oxford Placement Test. They were divided into three groups each consisted of 12 participants referred to as Group A, Group B, and Group C. Quick Oxford Placement Test was given to 60 students to investigate their level of proficiency, as we needed intermediate students. Five English short stories were chosen for the participants to study whose titles are mentioned below:

- I'm a Fool by Sherwood Anderson
- Tears, Idle Tears by Elizabeth Brown
- Hills like Wild Elephants by Ernest Hemingway
- The Evening Sun by William Faulkner
- The Rocking-Horse Winner by D.H. Lawrence

Five translated Persian folk tales were also used to conduct the present study, which are listed:

- The Blind Baba Abdalla
- Alibaba
- Forty Fortunes
- Prince Ahmed and the Fairy Paribanou
- The Magic Horse

Two sets of reading comprehension tests were given to the participants, one as a pretest and the other as a post-test. Each test contained two passages and ten multiple choice comprehension questions which were designed according to the proficiency level of intermediate students. It is worth mentioning that the passages were non-literary texts. All 60 participants took Quick Oxford Placement Test and the grades of 36 participants were between 38 and 48; therefore, all of them were at intermediate level of

proficiency forming a homogeneous sample. We divided them randomly into three groups; each consisted of 12 learners. The learners in the three groups were given a reading comprehension test as a pretest. Then, group A was asked to study 5 English short stories given by the researchers, group B was supposed to study 5 translated Persian folk tales chosen by the researchers, and group C studied for reading comprehension as they had studied before. Therefore, Group C was considered as our control group. The materials used for the control group were selected from different reading books, internet, magazine, etc. It is worth mentioning that all of the participants were checked and monitored by their teachers to make sure they had studied the aforementioned pieces of literature thoroughly and appropriately. The teachers asked the learners questions on the stories and folk tales and wanted them to give summaries on them. In a two week interval, they were given another reading comprehension test as a posttest.

**Result**

For the purpose of investigating the effect of short stories and translated Persian folk tales on the EFL learners' reading comprehension, two one-way Analyses of Variance were conducted, one for the pretest and the other for the posttest. The independent variables of this study are short stories and translated Persian folk tales, while the dependant variable is the learners' scores on the reading comprehension test. Considering the descriptive results of the pretest, it is evident that the three groups enjoy homogeneous variance and the participants were divided appropriately ( $p= 0.570$ ).

**Table 1. Descriptive Analysis**

Test of Homogeneity of Variances			
Pretest			
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.573	2	33	.570

The results of the ANOVA indicated that there was no significant difference ( $p=0.728$ ) between the three groups in pretest.

**Table 2. ANOVA on Reading Comprehension Pretest**

Pretest					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	172.222	2	86.111	.320	.728
Within Groups	8883.333	33	269.192		
Total	9055.556	35			

Based on the results reported in table 3, there was a significant difference ( $P=.0001$ ) between the performances of the three groups of participants after the instructions and strategies to improve reading comprehension skill regarding the scores of posttest.

**Table 3. ANOVA on Reading Comprehension Posttest**

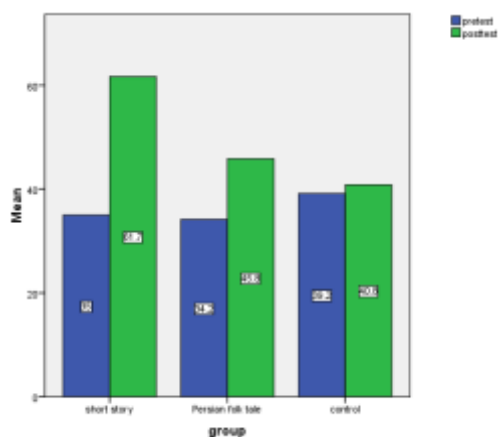
Posttest					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2838.889	2	1419.444	12.491	.000
Within Groups	3750.000	33	113.636		
Total	6588.889	35			

**Table 4. Post Hoc Results**

Multiple Comparisons						
posttest Bonferroni						
(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
short story	Persian folk tale	15.833*	4.352	.003	4.86	26.81
	control	20.833*	4.352	.000	9.86	31.81
Persian folk tale	short story	-15.833*	4.352	.003	-26.81	-4.86
	control	5.000	4.352	.777	-5.98	15.98
control	short story	-20.833*	4.352	.000	-31.81	-9.86
	Persian folk tale	-5.000	4.352	.777	-15.98	5.98

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The Post Hoc results on the posttest (Table 4) show that Group A outperformed Groups B and C; while there was no significant difference between Groups B and C ( $p= 0.777$ ), indicating that short stories enhanced the EFL learners' reading comprehension, but translated Persian folk tales had no significant effect on reading comprehension. The bar graph of the results of pretest and posttest is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Bar Graph of Pretest and Posttest Score

*Obstacles in Development of Livestock Sector- Evidence from Kazakhstan*

### Conclusion

Using literature especially short stories can influence reading comprehension of the learners. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether English short stories and translated Persian folk tales can affect this skill of Iranian EFL learners, and if so, which one has a greater impact on their reading comprehension ability. The advantage of the Persian folk tales over English short stories is that the Iranian EFL learners are more familiar with the plot and they can guess the ending of the tale; while English short stories were written by the native English authors and they are original English texts. The results of the statistical operations indicated that English short stories can influence reading comprehension ability, while translated Persian folk tales have no significant effect on reading skill. The results of the effect of short stories were in line with Lao and Krashen's (2000) and Erkaya's (2005) study demonstrating that they affect reading comprehension in a positive way. We can conclude that the main texts written by native authors have more influence than ones which are translated from Persian to English. It seems that when the learners are familiar with the story, they do not pay attention to all the concepts and their background knowledge affects their quality of reading. However, when the learners are faced with a new kind of material which they know nothing about, they have to pay more attention to every concept, vocabulary, and grammatical structure to grasp the meaning as well as understanding the whole story. Since the size of the sample was small, the results cannot be generalized to all Iranian EFL contexts. Other variables such as gender, age, and cultural background can influence the results of the study. In addition, the results may change according to the proficiency level of the learners. Further research is recommended to validate the findings of the current study. The results of all EFL studies and the view of reading comprehension lead to several implications for the teachers. Many experts support use of literature in foreign language teaching, but it can be seen that literary texts in language classes are not without problem. Hismanoglu (2005) found this problem that First, there are very few pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in a language classroom. Second, there is a lack of preparation in the area of literature teaching in TESL/TEFL programs. Third, there is the absence of clear-cut objectives defining the role of literature in ESL /EFL. Many instructors try to include literature in their classroom, but there is lack the background and training in that field. (p.65) The teachers and instructors of English as a foreign language can use literary texts as well as short stories in their classes for the purpose of improving their students' reading comprehension ability. Literature can be a great resource for the teachers and materials developers in the field of language teaching.

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